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Dancing Naked: Precarious Labour in the Contemporary Female Strip Trade

DANCE NU: TRAVAIL PRECAIRE DANS LE COMMERCE DES FEMMES CONTEMPORAINE

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Abstract
This paper explores the precarious labour conditions of the female strip trade in Canada and the United States. In a 2001 study of the feminization of work, Leah Vosko suggested that the current labour market in Canada is characterized by a move towards increased temporary and precarious work. Building on Vosko's study, this paper explores how the contemporary female strip trade is situated within, and characterized by, these precarious labour conditions. Some of these conditions include: an unsteady income, an undefined and non-regulated employee/employer relationship, physical and emotional exhaustion, as well as an absence of benefits and/or compensation. Drawing on eleven autobiographies of professional strippers, and other empirical studies in the substantive area, this paper unobtrusively explores the precarious nature of the contemporary female strip trade while simultaneously exploring the larger labour trends it is situated within.

Key words: Precarious labour; Temporary work; gender; Qualitative research

Résumé
Cet article explore les conditions précaires de travail du commerce de la bande des femmes au Canada et aux États-Unis. Dans une étude de 2001 de la féminisation du travail, Leah Vosko suggéré que le marché actuel du travail au Canada est caractérisé par une évolution vers le travail temporaire et précaire a augmenté. S'appuyant sur l'étude de Vosko, cet article explore comment le commerce de bande contemporaine féminine est situé à l'intérieur, et se caractérise par, ces conditions de travail précaires. Certaines de ces conditions comprennent: un revenu instable, une indéfinie et non réglementée employé/ employeur relation, l'épuisement physique et émotionnel, ainsi que l'absence d'avantages sociaux et/ ou de compensation. Dessin sur onze autobiographies de strip-teaseuses professionnelles, et d'autres études empiriques dans le domaine de fond, cet article explore discrètement le caractère précaire du commerce bande de femmes contemporaines, tout en explorant les tendances du travail plus elle est située à l'intérieur.

Mots clés: Travail de Précarité; Le travail temporaire; Sexe; Recherche qualitative

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INTRODUCTION
Stripping can be defined as work that involves the seductive removal of clothing in front of an audience for tips or pay (Fogel, 2007). Strippers are often characterized as self-entrepreneurs, responsible for gaining access to, and employment from, the strip clubs they are involved with. With their naked bodies on display, strippers are provided with little physical, emotional or financial security from the clubs in which they are performing. These labour conditions, among others, can be considered unstable or precarious. Insufficient attention has been given to the feminized work of stripping and the gendered, precarious labour climate it is situated within. This paper seeks to address this absence, arguing that some women choose to enter the strip trade amidst a labour climate

that provides unappealing options for some women, and that these precarious labour conditions have also come to characterize the contemporary female strip trade. This paper unobtrusively explores the precarious nature of the contemporary female strip trade while simultaneously examining the larger labour trends it is situated within.

RESEARCH ON WORK IN THE FEMALE STRIP TRADE

In a recent article, Katherine Frank (2007) identifies a need for social science research that situates the contemporary strip trade within larger labour trends. She contends that the vast majority of research within this substantive area has de-contextualized the strip trade, viewing it as an isolated body of practices. Within this research on the strip trade, however, there has been many topics explored, such as: performivity (Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Fogel, 2007; Ronai & Ellis, 1989), deviance (Weseley, 2003; Thompson, Harred, & Burks, 2003), surveillance (Egan, 2004), socialization (Lewis, 1998), and masculinity and male space (Egan, 2003; Frank, 2002). This paper seeks to address a current void within the literature on the strip trade, and will explore the strip trade, as it exists within contemporary, gendered labour trends.

Studies of the female strip trade that have focused primarily on labour conditions appear to center on what Arlie Hochschild (1987, p.7) terms "emotion work". Bruckert (2002), Egan (2005), Pasko (2002), and Deshotels and Forsyth (2006) all examine the labour conditions of the strip trade as characterized by the male consumption of performative emotions of female dancers. The work of the stripper, within these studies, is perceived as a transaction between economic capital and emotion.

This paper attempts to move past the emotion work of strippers, to explore the precarious labour conditions that the contemporary female strip trade is situated within and characterized by. As such, this paper represents a significant contribution to the literature pertaining to work in the female strip trade, particularly as a response to Frank's (2007) call for research that situates the contemporary strip trade within larger labour trends in North America.

A PRECARIOUS LABOUR CLIMATE

The contemporary stripping industry is embedded within and reflective of larger historical labour trends. In her study of gendered employment trends, Leah Vosko (2001) suggests that the current 'feminized' labour market in Canada is characterized by a move towards increased part-time and temporary work. Vosko (2001) suggests that the years surrounding the Second World War were characterized by standard employment relationships, intended to provide a narrow group of male workers with full-time employment and benefits. During the Second World War, the Canadian Government actively encouraged women to leave their domestic work to occupy the vacant positions of men who were away at war. When the men returned, the women were forced out of their wartime work back into their homes or into traditionally female dominated employment sectors.

This postwar period was characterized by a rise in the service economy, which resulted in an abundance of jobs in service and clerical work. These industries provided white, middle-class, married women with the opportunity to hold part-time, temporary positions. This work was often managed by temporary help agencies. A select group of women were given the opportunity to work within these industries. Although they were given access, they were provided with limited opportunities of mobility compared to their male counterparts. In general, the desire of women to work was perceived as a social problem (Vosko, 2001).

This growth of non-standard employment relationships, similar to those Vosko describes (2001), has both limited and conditioned the experiences of women within the contemporary labour force in Canada and the United States. It is likely that the choice of some women to enter the strip trade is often fueled by their frustration within a labour climate that provides unappealing options for women. This sentiment is supported by a former female stripper, Lily Burana (2001), who writes:

> I have, however, had a number of tedious, ass-busting jobs, mostly when I was in high school: cleaning lady, supermarket cashier, department store clerk. So I know a bit about scraping people's crap off of toilets, wearing mildly humiliating smocklike uniforms, and shuffling and refolding product for an indifferent corporation. I also know about trading all that for a job where you can make in one night what you used to earn in a week, or a month. Or two months (p. 55).

This example illustrates a women's struggle with the lack of viable employment outside of the strip trade.

Some evidence does suggest that women often have other reasons for entering the strip trade. For example, Bartlett (2004) advocates that some women choice to enter the strip trade is based less on a conscious comparison between stripping and other jobs, and more as a result of a history of abuse, or broken homes. It is unclear to what extent this is representative. Liepe-Levinson (2002, p. 8/9) suggests that: "the personal lives of and backgrounds of American strippers are as varied and incongruous as the shows they perform" and further, "are far too diverse and multi-faceted to draw clear-cut conclusions about their job choice *en masse*, other than the need to make a living."

In general there is, however, support for the idea that current labour trends, which provide unappealing options for women, influence some women's decisions to enter the strip trade. This was the case for Lily Burana (2001) who chose stripping over other traditionally female occupations that were available to her. Similarly, Diablo Cody (2006) worked through a temporary help agency in

Minnesota before quitting to strip full-time because she found that she enjoyed it more, and it met her financial needs more readily.

There also appears to be a common theme of stripping as a means to pay for one's education. A fact that seems to often get ignored in studies of labour trends in Canada and the United States is the increasing costs of education. While some strippers may use their student status as a means to neutralize some of the cognitive dissonance or stigma that they feel because of the marginalized aspects of their work, it should also be noted that many women might choose to strip because of a labour market that demands increasingly high levels of education, but makes it increasingly expensive to achieve these levels of education.

Many empirical examples support this contention that numerous women enter the strip trade to finance their post-secondary education. Chris Bruckert (2002), Elisabeth Eaves (2004) and Lauri Lewin (1984) all discuss their experiences of working as strippers to finance their studies. Similarly, Heidi Mattson's (1995) memoir of her work as a stripper is filled with accounts of her financial struggle to pay for her Ivy League education at Brown University, despite already receiving numerous grants and scholarships.

This discussion illustrates the North American labour market in which the contemporary female strip trade is embedded. It is a market that limits the opportunities of many women to part-time, temporary work. To break from this feminized ghetto would require significant economic, cultural and social resources. Given this, it appears that some women are choosing to become strippers in a labour market that provides limited opportunities.

PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY FEMALE STRIP TRADE

Leah Vosko (2001, 2003) describes the unappealing aspects of temporary work in North America as follows: it is unstable with no guarantee of permanency or full-time hours; it provides little to no benefits, health care or maternity leave; it generates an undefined and unregulated relationship between employers and employees; it creates a uniquely individualistic and competitive work environment; and, it often places the worker in physically and emotionally demanding positions. While this paper has suggested that some strippers enter the strip trade because of these unappealing aspects of temporary work, it is imperative to note that these unappealing, precarious working conditions characterize the contemporary female strip trade as well.

Each of the precarious conditions of temporary work outlined by Leah Vosko (2001, 2003) can be found in the contemporary female strip trade. First, the income of strippers is unstable, unregulated, and unpredictable. Many strippers work on a tip-based income that varies drastically between nights (Lewin, 1984; Mattson, 1995; Burana, 2001; Bruckert, 2002; Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Bartlett, 2004; Eaves, 2004; Cody, 2006). As strippers' income is largely dependent on their appearance, any gained weight, physical scarring, blemishing, injury, or signs of aging, often results in a decrease in tips (Burana, 2001; Bruckert, 2002). Clubs may shut down or change their venue leaving the stripper unemployed (Black, 2005). Strippers usually receive no benefits or maternity leave (Sundahl, 1987; Bruckert, 2002). The marginal nature of stripping as an occupation in contemporary society also makes it difficult for strippers to secure loans (Bruckert, 2002) or find alternative employment after years of stripping (Black, 2005). One stripper interviewed by Bruckert describes the instability of her income as follows:

> It's still kinda nice sometimes to have that steady income like a normal job…. Like instead of dancing, just a normal nine-to-five job. That way you can really do your budget. 'Cause I find, when you don't know what you're gonna make, or one day it's a hundred bucks, you go and you spend it 'cause you figure tomorrow I'll make it back, y'know, it's fine. But tomorrow you go and the next day you only make fifty…. It's never the same (2002, p. 93).

The contemporary strip trade is also characterized by an undefined relationship between employers and employees (Burana, 2001; Bruckert, 2002). As was previously suggested, strippers are characterized as self-entrepreneurs in that it is their responsibility to gain access to strip clubs. The stripper generally makes her wages in tips, and provides either a set fee or a percentage of her tips to the club and other workers such as bartenders, waitresses and doormen in exchange for their services. It is required that the stripper work within the rules of the club, as stated by the owner and managers, or they can be fined or fired. Sundahl (1987) notes that if a stripper is late or misses a day of work owners can fine or even fire her. As Bruckert (2002) reveals, the club tells the stripper her hours of work to which she has little or no control.

Burana (2001) also contends that strippers are often micromanaged by managers and employers in the clubs in terms of how they are to dress, act, and solicit customers. According to Burana (2001), relationships between employers and strippers can be very exploitative. Strippers are required to compensate both the club and the other staff members for their services, which facilitate stripper's work. The combination of an unregulated relationship between employer and employee, combined with an unpredictable, unsteady income, it is not uncommon for strippers to fall into debt with a club. For example, they can go to work for a week and end up being in debt $200 to the club because their fees outweigh how much they have earned in tips (Burana, 2001).

It is through obfuscating the nature of this employer/employee relationship, and propagating the idea that

strippers work for themselves, that strip club managers and owners avoid paying for benefits. Burana (2001) filed a lawsuit against the owners of a chain of strip clubs because of the unfair fees they charged to dancers, without providing any benefits; the law suit was settled at nearly three million dollars to be paid out to current and former 'employees' of this particular chain of clubs. Most strippers, however, are not this fortunate.

Returning now to Vosko's (2001) work, it has also been suggested that precarious working conditions can lead to uniquely individualistic and competitive work environments. This atmosphere appears characteristic of the contemporary strip trade, as strippers are in constant competition with one another for jobs, the most profitable hours, and the attention of male patrons (Bruckert, 2002). Drawing on her previous experience as a stripper, Bruckert (2002) suggests that there has been a decline in the camaraderie amongst workers in the strip club in recent years. This sentiment is supported by Burana (2001) who suggests that developing meaningful relationships with her co-workers throughout her career as a stripper was extremely difficult.

Although Bruckert (2002) does suggest a decline in the camaraderie of workers in the contemporary strip trade, she also contends that an important aspect of strip trade work is what she terms the 'informal economy', which encompasses the little things workers do for one another. While camaraderie and teamwork in the strip trade appear to be important aspects of safety and wellbeing, there appears to be support for the view that the precariousness of the contemporary strip trade is eroding these aspects of the work (Burana, 2001; Bruckert, 2002).

There are also a multitude of physical dangers and circumvented health and safety policies in the contemporary strip trade. Liepe-Levinson (2002) states that industry competitiveness and instability of income often lead strippers to engage in physically harmful and dangerous work such as death-defying pole maneuvers. The work of the stripper can also be very physically demanding such as: dancing in high heels for extended periods of time, rarely sitting to take breaks, doing the splits and other aerobic dance moves, and injuring knees and other joints on the stage during intricate dance moves.

The work of strippers is not only physically demanding, but also places them at risk of acute and chronic injuries. When strippers are injured on the job, there is no regulation in place that requires strip clubs to provide compensation to injured dancers (Bruckert, 2002). Certain dangers also accompany working in an environment where alcohol is being served, men are openly expressing their sexual desires and urges, and other dancers are protecting their territory. One dancer interviewed by Bruckert (2002, p. 94) expressed her fears of physical injury from coworkers as follows: "I can't work with black eyes, I can't work with big scars across my face."

Beyond the physical dangers of working in the contemporary strip trade, are the psychological and emotional strain that result from the constant preparation, presentation and management of self. In *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild (1983) details her theory of 'emotion work', an idea that is applicable to the work of strippers. Hochschild (1983, p. 7) defines emotion work as labour that "requires one to induce of suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others." Building on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical principles, Hochschild (1983) suggests that workers, particularly service workers, must continuously engage in a specific form of impression management termed 'emotion management'.

To ensure an income, strippers must continuously perform acts that are suggestive of their sexual prowess, availability, and femininity, regardless of what they may be feeling. Lauri Lewin (1984, p. 74) writes: "And even those dancers who seemed to love the rug with sexual abandon… felt no passion, did not get turned on, only acted the part". To abide by the 'feeling rules' of stripping, strippers may engage in "surface acting" through the language of their body, or in "deep acting" by attempting to alter their inner feelings (Hochschild, 1983). The emotional labour of strippers also requires them to both inflate and deflate the status of their customers; they must give performances that appear authentic to accumulate emotional capital, while also ensuring an economic return that does not taint this authenticity. It is for this reason that Heidi Mattson (1995, p. 179) trenchantly describes stripping as, " a perilous mixture of emotion and economics." This constant emotion labour comes at cost to strippers; they encounter what former female stripper Lily Burana (2001) terms 'stripper damage'. Burana defines stripper damage as a "permanently shell-shocked look… that inability to de-dramatize" (p. 221).

Furthermore, Fogel (2007) suggests that through constant performances of gender, body, and emotion, the self of the stripper may become commodified and estranged. Supporting this notion, Heidi Mattson (1995, p. 197) writes: "Stripping was a mine field. Playing the dumb blonde, Binki giggled and blushed her way to a stuffed safe deposit box-- and a terribly confused self-image. She didn't know who she was anymore." Continuing on, Dahlia Schweitzer (2000, p. 66) writes: "The fake is the real thing, and the real thing is a shadow of its former self." This commodification and estrangement of both emotion and self appear to be a further aspect of the precarious labour that strippers must engage in throughout their everyday work.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to illustrate the precarious

labour climate that the contemporary strip trade is situated within and characterized by. Addressing a current void in the literature on the labour relations of the stripping industry, this study has situated the female strip trade within its larger social context. Through non-reactive analysis, it has been found that the contemporary strip trade is characterized by precarious working conditions that provide: an unsteady income for strippers, an unclear employee/employer relationship, no benefits or compensation, an individualistic and competitive work environment, and physically and emotionally demanding work. As Leah Vosko (2001) claims, these are similar characteristics of the temporary help industry, which has in recent years become the normative mode of employment for women in North America.

As Vosko (2001) claims, the trend towards non-permanent, part-time, contract work is not disappearing in North America but, rather, continues to rise. Precarious labour conditions can now be seen in a wide range of employment sectors, including Canadian universities. Tenured professors are retiring and being replaced by sessional instructors and contract faculty who are not given the job security, wages, or benefits traditionally afforded to university professors. Further research and policy recommendations need to be made to address this growing issue of precarious labour in North America, particularly as it appears to negatively effect women in particular.

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